

WHERE DOES THE SANTIAGO STAFF BEGIN?

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This article started with the discovery that sign 11 was preceded by sign 76 on the Santiago Staff in 28 occurrences out of 35, and that this digraph, 76-11, occurred only on lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 13, and 14. The Staff bearing 14 lines, this suggested that these seven lines constituted a continuous text starting on line 12. Searching for corroborating evidence led to unexpected, and disturbing, observations.

THE SANTIAGO STAFF

The Santiago Staff is about 125 cm long (4 ft), its diameter about 60 mm (2½ in.). One extremity is thicker, Fischer giving its diameter as 64 mm, with 57 mm for the thinner end. Authors disagree about its exact length, Philippi claiming it to be 112.5 cm (3 ft 8¼ in.), Imbelloni 123.5 cm (4 ft ½ in.), Métraux 125 cm (4 ft), Chauvet 128 cm (4 ft 2½ in.), Dederen 126 cm (4 ft 1½ in.), and Fischer also 126 cm (Barthel 1958:24, Fischer 1997:455). It is covered in 14 lines of writing, running lengthwise. The Santiago Staff being a cylinder, there is no obvious way of deciding where it begins.

FISCHER ON THE STAFF

Fischer (1997:456) writes: "*Philippi's original line numbers were arbitrary. Philippi himself (1875: 678) reckoned that the 'double lines' appearing non-boustrophedonically at the thin end were the last ones – they are, in fact, lines 14 and 2 – and deduced from this that his line 13 was probably the first.*" There is no trace of double lines appearing whether boustrophedonically or non-boustrophedonically in Fischer's drawings of the Staff, nor in Barthel's, and there are no direct quotes of Philippi. Readers are left guessing what that could possibly mean. In fact, the "double lines" appear at the thick end of the staff, as Philippi clearly stated: "*the double lines of the thicker extremity*" (*los renglones dobles del extremo mas grueso* – see also Figure 2, reconstructed from Philippi's drawings), and they are not lines 14 and 2, but lines 1 and 2 of Fischer's drawing (1997:451), that is, lines 12 and 13 of Barthel's.

Fischer opines that line 12 was the start of the text: "*My own investigations with the original 'Staff' have identified as the text's first line Philippi's/Barthel's line 12*". He says this for two reasons.

First reason: "*the three-quarter line that commences with an exceptional half-sized glyph some 35 cm from the thin end of the Staff*". But there is no exceptional half-sized glyph there, neither in Barthel's line drawings, nor in Fischer's, as shown in the figure below which reproduces its beginning (Fischer's drawing is on the left side, Barthel's on the right). What is exceptional, however, is the disagreement between the two authors as to the identity of the first sign.

Second reason: "*This [point] is just below where the thumb of a c. 190 cm-tall, right-handed man would touch the artifact whose thick end is resting on the ground, next to the*



Figure 1. Beginning of line 12 of the Santiago Staff, according to Fischer, and according to Barthel.

instep of the left foot, tilted diagonally to the left". If the right-handed man in question is not 190 cm tall (6 ft 3 in.) but only 170 cm as I am (5 ft 7 in.) and if his arm is also 10% shorter (i.e. 6 cm or so), his thumb will *theoretically* reach 14 cm (5½ in.) below the point in question, that is, 49 cm (19¼ in.) "*from the thin end of the Staff*". In fact, using a broomstick tilted to the left, standing on 20 cm of phone books to reach the required height, my right arm fully stretched, I found my thumb barely able to hold the top of the stick, let alone reach below it. Add to that that the reach of the thumb is highly dependent on the angle of the tilt, that height and arm length vary greatly from person to person, add that the position described is nearly impossible to achieve when holding the Staff in one's right hand (try it: either the broomstick has to be tilted to the right, or it has to be held in the left hand with its lower end next to the right foot), and the argument collapses.

Fischer further writes: "*Acknowledging the frequent appearance of glyph 76, the phallus, Barthel (1958a:322) was convinced that the text of the 'Staff' dealt unmistakably with questions of procreation, birth, and maturation and is closely connected to customs for the initiation of the first-born son*"²⁹. He also writes (1997:444): "*In 1993, as a result of the provisional identification on the 'Staff' (RR 10) of similar triads as procreation formulae, I could demonstrate that isolated segments on RR 8v [Tablet G, a.k.a. Small Santiago] were procreation triads and that the text of this side of the tablet was probably a cosmogony, as with RR 10 and 11a [Tablet T, a.k.a. Honolulu 3629] (Fischer, 1993b, 1995a, b). Barthel has since endorsed this.*" No reference, not even a "*pers. com.*" is provided for this endorsement, which, according to Robinson (2002:240), was never published.

This brings us to consider what Barthel wrote.

BARTHEL ON THE STAFF

Contrary to what is claimed by Fischer, Barthel made no mention of glyph 76 on page 322 of his *Grundlagen* nor anywhere on the neighbouring pages. He merely wrote that "*Many inscriptions deal with fertility; the text of the Santiago Staff in particular deals unmistakably with questions of procreation, birth [and so on]*" (*Manche Inschriften beziehen sich auf Fruchtbarkeitsmotive; vor allem der Text des Santiagostabes behandelt sich mit aller Deutlichkeit Fragen der Zeugung, Geburt und Reife und hängt eng mit Bräuchen für die Initiation des erstgeborenen Sohnes zusammen*). Barthel does not mention glyph 76 at all in his description of the Staff (1958:23-24). This glyph is discussed only briefly

ibid.:280-281 where, having equated it with *ure* "penis" on the evidence of a single reading by Metoro, Barthel added that it might also have been used to represent the god Tane: "*If the sign interpreted as "ure" is exchangeable as well with the symbol for the name of Tane, then this substitution with a phallic symbol underlines the special character of this god as manhood personified*" (*Wenn das als "ure" vermutete Zeichen außerdem mit dem Namenssymbol für die Gottheit Tane ausgetauscht werden kann, so unterstreicht die Substitution durch ein Phallus-Symbol den besonderen Charakter dieses Gottes, in welchem sich die Männlichkeit schlechthin verkörpert*).

Much later (1990), Barthel radically changed his interpretation of the Staff, seeing in it no longer a text on fertility, procreation and so on, but a text on lunations, this on the evidence of 30 occurrences which he observed of sign 69, which he had interpreted as meaning *po* "night" from the evidence of Metoro's readings, and he suggested that the Staff was another lunar calendar, only far more detailed than the one on the Mamari Tablet. There is no mention of Barthel's altered view in Fischer (1997) beyond the very inconspicuous note 29 closing Fischer's translation "*the initiation of the first-born son*" of Barthel's "*die Initiation des erstgeborenen Sohnes*". This note sends readers to page 653, where they find "*See also Barthel 1990*" without any explanation, not even a publication title. They must then turn to the bibliography, page 674, to discover the reference to the article in question. Barthel's later interpretation of the Staff, which does not concur with Fischer's, has been relegated to where no-one will likely find it.

Unable to decide where the Staff started, Barthel originally followed Philippi (1875) in his choice of a first line, while remarking that this choice was arbitrary (1958:24): "*Philippi numbered the lines I, II, and so on, from an arbitrary starting point*" (*Philippi numerierte die Zeilen von einem willkürlichen Einsatzzpunkt an mit I, II etc.*). But he did not draw attention to his having also followed Philippi in his numbering of the lines (downwards), which goes against the known reading direction of the tablets (upwards). Barthel remarked that line 12 was shorter than the rest, and he commented, cryptically: "*the beginning and the end of the text were possibly rather determined through the forking of lines XIII-XIV*" (*möglicherweise waren Anfang und Ende des Textes durch die Gabelung der Zeilen XIII-XIV festgelegt*). There is no other mention, and no explanation, of this "forking" or "bifurcation" (*Gabelung*) of lines 13 and 14, and no sign of it in his sketch of the layout of the Santiago Staff nor in his drawings of it.

Barthel opens his 1990 article with: "*The present situation in the decipherment of the Easter Island script is characterised by stagnation and defeatism*" (*Die gegenwärtige Lage in der Entzifferung der Osterinselschrift ist gekennzeichnet durch Stagnation und Defaitismus*). After a lengthy introduction he mentions that three glyphs were missing from his 1958 drawings of the Santiago Staff: a glyph 2 on line 1, a glyph 755 on line 5, a glyph 97b on line 4. He comments: "*These omissions have however been corrected, insofar as the missing glyphs did appear in the transcription. The transcription is therefore to be used in preference*" (*Diese Auslassungen*

wurden aber insofern korrigiert, als sie schon in der Transkription Berücksichtigung fanden. Die Transkription ist daher mit Vorrang zu nutzen). Complete drawings of the Staff are provided in the article, starting from line 13, which he now thinks is the beginning of the text, and continuing onto line 12, 11, 10, 9, and so on, that is, in the reverse of the order originally adopted. Therefore, the drawings must have been rearranged. Yet, the missing glyphs are still missing. For the error-free transcription, readers have to turn to Barthel 1958, for there is none in his 1990 paper. Thus, 32 years after the first publication of the corpus, known errors were still left uncorrected.

PHILIPPI ON THE STAFF

Philippi describes the Staff thus: "*the staff is 1.125 m long and 6 cm thick; but it is thicker in one extremity, having 13 lines on the thinner part and 14 on the thicker extremity*" (*el bastón tiene 1 m 125 de largo i un grosor de 6 centímetros; sin embargo, es mas grueso en un extremo, pues tiene trece renglones en la parte delgada i catorce en el extremo mas grueso*). He then explains how to reconstitute the lines of the Staff as they actually appear by piecing together the lines of his reproductions. He continues: "*line XI reduplicated itself in its middle, and that is how there were, as I mentioned above, only 13 lines on the thin end of the staff*" (*En medio del renglón XI, éste se duplicaba; así es que había, como lo advertí arriba, solo trece renglones en la parte delgada del bastón*). This is, at long last, the first inkling of what Barthel might have meant by "bifurcation of lines XIII and XIV" (*die Gabelung der Zeilen XIII-XIV*). The inspection of Philippi's drawings reveals a misprint: it is not line XI that duplicates itself, but line XII (Figure 2). Whereas the reproductions in Philippi allow the truth to be reconstituted, there are none in Barthel which do.

Writing before Jaussen's observations were available, Philippi had not figured out where the reading of the tablets should start. He mentions eight possible starting points when there are at most only four: "*It has been impossible for us to discover anything that could indicate where the writing started: one can equally reasonably take each of the eight corners of a tablet as starting point for its reading*" (*Nos ha sido imposible descubrir algo que indicara dónde principia el escrito: con igual razon puede tomarse cada una de las ocho esquinas de cada tablita como punto de partida para la lectura*). Philippi continues: "*The matter seems different in the case of the staff; perhaps we may surmise that the double lines of its thicker extremity are the last; in this case, line XIII in the third plate A would be the first. Under this hypothesis reading would have started from the thicker extremity.*" (*En el bastón la cosa parece distinta, acaso podemos suponer que los renglones dobles del extremo mas grueso son los últimos; en este caso, el renglón designado en la tercera lámina A con el número XIII sería el primero. En ésta suposición debería principiarse a leer por el extremo mas grueso*). Nevertheless, he concludes that all this is only conjectural: "*pero, como se ve, todo eso no pasa de probabilidades.*"

Figure 2 shows lines 11 to 14 of the Staff reconstructed from Philippi's drawings and explanations. For want of space, only their extremities are shown and the median part where

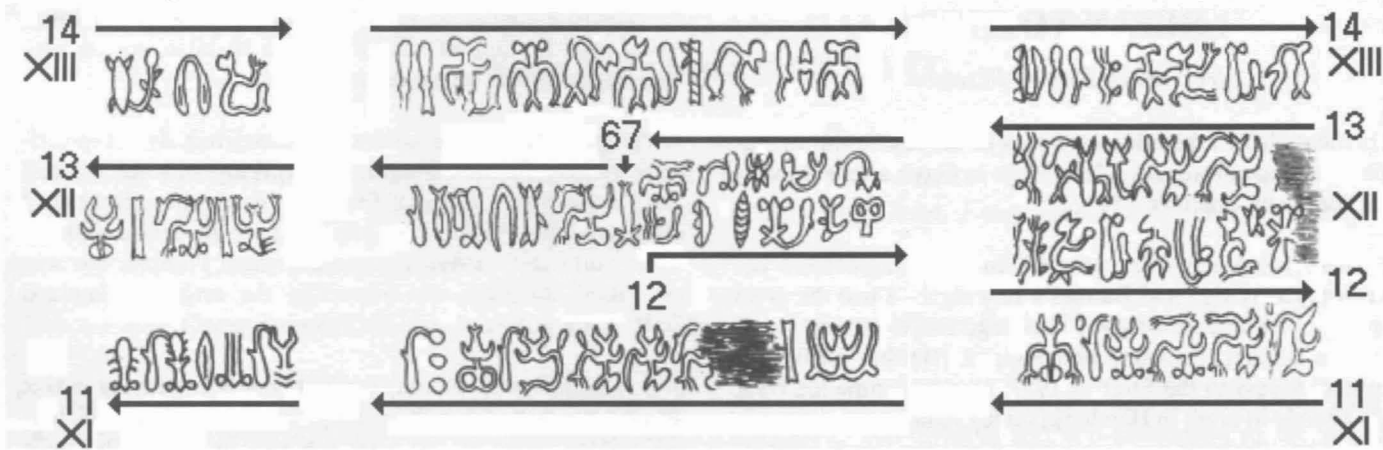


Figure 2. Section of the Santiago Staff, thin end on the left, showing the "forking" (*Gabelung*) of lines 12 and 13

line 13 splits into two (Barthel's "*Gabelung*"). The thinner end of the Staff is on the left, the thicker end on the right. The direction of reading is indicated by arrows. Note how the glyph starting line 12 agrees with Barthel, not with Fischer (Figure 1). Note that, contrary to what Philippi wrote, line XIII (14) could not start from the thick end (on the right in Figure 2). Writing before Jaussen, Philippi did not know the direction of reading: from left to right when a line shows right side up, from right to left when it shows upside down. Also note that, whereas Barthel had remarked about the "bifurcation of lines 13 and 14" (*die Gabelung der Zeilen XIII–XIV*) it is in fact lines 12 and 13 that fork – or merge.

Whichever way the text was read, wherever the reading began, we may safely assume that the beginning and the direction of reading were the same as of writing. If reading started from line 12, as Fischer holds, the scribe would have begun with half-sized glyphs, gradually increasing to full size at the end of the line. Once he had reached the end of line 12, he may have moved up (to line 13) or down (to line 11). It is far more likely that he moved up, as did all the scribes who wrote the tablets. If so, having started line 13 with full-sized glyphs, he would have reduced them gradually to half size until he reached the point where he had begun writing line 12. Then, suddenly, he would have reverted to full-sized glyphs with sign 67, the "palm tree".

There is little point in going through all the remaining possibilities. Let it suffice to remark that this section of line XII according to Philippi's numbering, forking into lines 12 and 13 according to Barthel's, is anomalous; and that this anomaly was glossed over both by Barthel and by Fischer, and was revealed only by turning to Philippi, published a hundred years earlier.

CONCLUSION

No conclusion can be reached about the Santiago Staff *que pase de probabilidades*. One conclusion, however, follows from the 200 hours or so spent researching this paper: one hundred and forty years after their discovery there is still no reliable corpus of the Easter Island hieroglyphic texts, and neither Fischer nor Barthel are to be trusted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Without the critical input from Yoram Meroz, met eight years ago over the Net; without his drawing my attention to the photographs in Heyerdahl et al. (1962) of the drawings in MacMillan Brown (1924), themselves out of Philippi (1875), this article would have demonstrated that the Santiago Staff began with line 12 according to Barthel's numbering. Perhaps a correct conclusion, but based on tainted data and so ultimately yet another piece of self-delusion added to the folly of *rongorongo* studies.

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